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Schweitzer cautiously optimistic about budget

By The Associated Press

HELENA - Gov. Brian Schweitzer predicts that the Legislature will finish its work on time and leave Helena with a balanced budget, despite the flap created when House Republicans split the big budget bill, House Bill 2, into six separate spending bills.

"It's kind of a dangerous game of brinkmanship, but I'm optimistic. I think it will come together," Schweitzer said during a Friday meeting with the Independent Record newspaper's editorial board.

"I don't think those legislators want to come back here for a special session," Schweitzer said.

The Democratic governor assailed the Republican plan, saying he's unsure how he'll proceed if the budget bills reach his desk in piecemeal fashion and not all at once at the end of the session. State statutes give the governor 10 days to act on bills the Legislature passes. If he does nothing, they become law.

"Do I sign this (first) one? Because I have no idea what the other five will bring," Schweitzer said. "I actually don't know how I can even function with six separate bills. Some are going to show up earlier, and some are going to show up later, and I'm going to have a difficult time balancing the budget."

He also questioned the Republican motives and the timing of breaking up the budget bill, a move that wasn't announced until 30 days into the session, when all the hearings on HB2 had already been held.

"If this is such a good idea, why was this not debated over the last six months?" he said, adding that the Republican leadership was content with a single budget bill in past sessions. "They're not freshman legislators, in fact the ones who are the authors of this have been around a long time."

On another matter, Schweitzer said he expects the negotiated state employee pay plan, which stalled briefly in the House before passage, to get through the Senate in short order.

He said he's pleased to see the Montana Historical Society take steps toward finding a location for a new history museum, although he's still "geography-neutral" when it comes to deciding where in Helena to put the museum.

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